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ABSTRACT

Magnet schools remain the most widespread form of school choice. This paper explores the relationship between parents' reasons for choice and their level of satisfaction and involvement with their chosen magnet school. The study involved 18 elementary magnet schools in 2 large urban school districts. A survey was sent to all parents with fifth-grade children in the sample schools. A total of 1,689 parents (65 percent) responded. Findings indicate that: (1) parents selected magnet schools for a wide variety of reasons and were highly satisfied with their chosen schools; (2) parents' reasons for choice and perceived influence over school decisions were important predictors of satisfaction with the school; and (3) parents' reasons for choice, perceived influence over school decisions, income, and distance from home to school significantly influenced parent involvement at school. Magnet-school parents indicated that they based their choice of school on academics, values, and discipline/safety. Those parents who chose on the basis of convenience indicated lower levels of satisfaction with their chosen school. Therefore, if a policy were implemented that required all parents to choose, it might result in a larger percentage of parents choosing for reasons of convenience. There was no correlation between parent income and influence; however, greater income was a predictor of parent involvement. Although the reasons for choice had some ability to predict parent involvement, they were more powerful predictors of parent satisfaction. Five tables are included. Appendices contain the study variables and an intercorrelation matrix of independent variables. (Contains 36 references). (LMI)

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Parent Involvement and Satisfaction in Magnet Schools: Do Reasons for Choice Matter?

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Parent Involvement and Satisfaction in Magnet Schools: Do Reasons for Choice Matter?

In the ongoing debate over school reform, choice has moved to the forefront. Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield (1996) attribute this renewed and increased interest in school choice to three factors: the Civil Rights movement, the diminished upward mobility perceived by many American citizens, and the rising ethnic diversity of this country's society. Collectively, these factors have led to greater use of school choice to promote educational and social equity through greater integration of schools and by affording families of lower socioeconomic status access to better schools than those typically found in their neighborhoods.

In addition to these social factors, renewed attention to school choice has also arisen from the privatization movement. The privatization movement focuses more on excellence than equity. The privatization movement has gained momentum because of an increasing discontent with the public provision of goods and services and a new philosophy regarding the appropriate role of government in society. Murphy (1996) attributes this discontent to a long period of unchecked government expansion, increased government intrusiveness into individual rights, the widespread belief that government is not performing well, disgruntlement with public bureaucracy, and concerns over the equity of the transfer of wealth. As a result of such beliefs, new philosophies regarding government have emerged and gained support. Murphy (1996) captures these new philosophies within two fusing shifts--a political shift to the right (i.e., conservatism) and an economic shift back to

fundamentalism. Collectively, these new philosophies are undergirding a renewed interest in private-market values and

greater freedom in choice of school.

Surveys consistently indicate that the majority of the public supports some form of choice. An Associated Press poll indicated that 68% of respondents believe parents should have the right to choose the schools their offspring attend (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992). In a separate study, 69% of those surveyed support allowing families to choose public schools, regardless of their residential location (Elam and Rose, 1995). Although a similar survey conducted by the same group indicated that the number of respondents favoring the use of choice to enable students to attend parochial and other private schools with public funding is less than those who support public school choice, support for such private school choice policies continues to increase (Elam and Rose, 1996).

Magnet schools remain the most widespread form of school choice. As Blank (1990) notes:

> The first magnet schools were designed in the early 1970s; in 1982-83, one-third of the largest urban districts had magnet schools; and today it would be difficult to find an urban school system without a magnet program. (p. 77)

During the 1991-92 school year, 230 school systems operated 2,400 magnet schools and 3,200 individual magnet programs in the United States. These magnet schools and programs served 1.2 million students. 68 % of all urban students were educated

in districts having magnet schools (Steel and Levine, 1994). This widespread implementation of magnet programs has come with a hefty price tag attached. Between 1985 and 1993, federal funding from the Magnet Schools Assistance Program totaled $739,500,000 with funded school systems receiving an average award in excess of 3.6 million dollars of support for magnet implementation over a two year period (Steel and Levine, 1994).

Given the public's desire for greater school choice, the effectiveness of magnet schools in achieving voluntary integration (Rossell and Clarke, 1988), recent evidence that public schools are again becoming more segregated by race (Orfield et al., 1996), and some evidence that magnet schools may increase student achievement (Gamoran, 1996), it seems likely that magnet schools will become a permanent fixture on the public education landscape.

Despite the popularity of magnets and twenty five years of experience with them, there is little empirical data regarding their consequences for students, parents, and school personnel. To date, the majority of research on magnet schools has focussed on which families choose magnet schools and why. Researchers were anxious to determine if magnets "cream" the most elite students and if they provide lower social class families an alternative to inferior neighborhood schools (Yu and Taylor, 1997). Furthermore, researchers wanted to understand families' reasons for choice of school to assess the potential of school choice programs to lead to improvements in schooling. If parents are choosing for academic reasons, it may be that choice can provide the impetus for changes in teaching and learning. However,

if parents are choosing because of convenience/proximity, it is less likely that choice will be a driving force for school improvement (Goldring and Hausman, 1996).

Research has also been conducted on the levels of parent involvement and satisfaction in magnet schools. In general, parents who choose magnet schools are highly satisfied and tend to be involved in their children's education (Goldring and Shapira, 1991; Bauch and Goldring, 1996). However, little research has been conducted to ascertain the relationships between characteristics of families who choose, their reasons for choice, and the implications of these on parent involvement and satisfaction. This paper attempts to address this void by exploring the relationship between parent's reasons for choice with their level of satisfaction and involvement with their chosen school. The extent to which parents perceive that they have influence in school level decisions will also be included as a predictor of parent satisfaction and involvement.

Because of a limited empirical data base on magnet schools, when necessary, this report will review related literature on findings from other choice settings. Choice advocates contend that many of the improved outcomes (e.g., increased parent satisfaction, greater parent involvement) in choice contexts stem from the act of choosing itself (Raywid, 1991). Given this logic, those outcomes may be highly consistent across different choice contexts. If the benefits are from choosing, why should it matter if the chooser is choosing a magnet school or a charter school? Thus, reviewing evidence on some outcomes from other choice contexts may shed light on the outcomes we could expect in magnet schools. Connections predicted

between the outcomes in different choice contexts should not be made lightly and should be followed up with research in each specific context to validate or refute them. The following sections review literature on parents' reasons for choice and parent satisfaction and involvement in different choice arrangements.

Parents' Reasons for Choice

The research on parents' reasons for choosing a school suggests a complex array of motivations (Maddaus, 1990). In an assessment of the Alum Rock voucher experiment, Bridge and Blackman (1978) found that 70.9% of parents cited location as a factor influencing their enrollment decision. Only 32% of the respondents mentioned program characteristics. During the 1980s, there were two extensive studies of parental choice. In a nationwide survey, Williams, Hancher, and Hutner (1983) reported that academic standards/courses--32.6%--was the most common factor for public school parents who contemplated other schools during the enrollment decision. Transportation/convenience accounted for only 15.0%. These findings are similar to those of Darling-Hammond and Kirby (1985), who surveyed parents in Minneapolis-St. Paul to assess the impact of tuition tax credits on parental school choice. Sixty percent of parents surveyed cited quality of school/education/program as an influence, while only 5.8% reported convenience/proximity of school as a factor. Both studies concluded that wealthier and more highly educated parents were more likely to have chosen schools through selection of housing or at the time of enrollment.

More recent evidence on parents' motives for choice is contradictory to the 1980s research. After conducting their own survey and reviewing studies in Arizona, Milwaukee, and Minnesota, the Carnegie Foundation (1992) concluded that "many parents who decide to send their children to another school appear to do so for nonacademic reasons" (p. 12). In the Carnegie survey, of parents who desired to send their child to a different school, only 15% cited academic quality, 11% smaller classes, and three percent good teachers as reasons.

Two conflicting analyses have been conducted on why parents participate in Minnesota's open enrollment plan. The first study reported that 40% of participating parents did so for reasons of convenience, while only 20% cited academic reasons (Minnesota House of Representatives, Research Department, 1990). A second study conducted for the U.S. Department of Education noted that 55% of parent respondents listed learning climate as a motivation for changing schools (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992). The data from Arizona are also contradictory. An initial survey conducted by the Arizona Department of Education in 1989 and cited in the Carnegie report (1992), indicated that only one-third of students who switched schools did so primarily for academic reasons. In a subsequent study of the Arizona context, general academics was listed as the most prevalent reason for transferring schools--30%. Twenty-one percent cited proximity reasons (Arizona Department of Education, Research and

Development Division, 1992)[1]. Similarly, in a study of Massachusetts' interdistrict choice plan, Fossey (1994) found that parents are not choosing for convenience, but are "making rational decisions when transferring their children out of their home communities, choosing districts with higher indicators of student performance and higher socioeconomic status than the districts they left" (p. 331).

Another perspective of why parents choose is based on parents' desire to enhance their satisfaction with their children's schools. According to this perspective, parents are choosing because they are dissatisfied with their previous school; they are going away from one school more than they are looking for something specific in another school. Martinez, Thomas, and Kemerer (1994) report that parents who choose an alternative to their zone school tend to be more dissatisfied with their previous school than non-choosers. In Milwaukee, Witte (1996) found that parents participating in a private school voucher plan were very dissatisfied with their local public schools. Collectively, these studies indicate that academic and non-academic reasons such as convenience, as well as dissatisfaction with the current school, are factors that influence parental choice of school.

School Choice and Parent Satisfaction

According to choice advocates, parents will be satisfied with their chosen school for several reasons. First, parents will be more satisfied simply as a result of

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[1] Differences in the terms used, "academic reasons" and "learning climate" may be contributing to the apparently contradictory results of these studies.

having the choice option. In other words, people feel good about having the freedom to make choices. Secondly, choice supporters assume that parents will use this freedom to make rational, value-based decisions, which will further enhance satisfaction because they acted rationally out of self-interest to maximize their satisfaction. From this perspective, parents know what their needs and interests are, and they will choose schools that have the ability to meet those needs and interests. It is presumed that parents can assess with some validity which schools are better able to achieve this. Third, as a result of investing time and energy in the choice process, even when there is no overt justification for increased satisfaction, parents may justify their choice and indicate increased satisfaction by viewing the school through "rose colored glasses" (Erickson, 1982).

While the above three reasons for enhanced parent satisfaction with schools of choice are directly related to the act of choosing, a final rationale for greater satisfaction is related to additional parent empowerment in choice settings and occurs after the act of choice. Specifically, as a consequence of having a greater voice and the threat to exit, parents can influence schools to operate in ways that enhance their level of satisfaction. In other words, parents influence schools to operate in ways that satisfy their needs.

Regardless of the cause, research universally shows greater satisfaction among parents who exercise choice of school. Overall, "Eighty-two percent of private-school parents and 61 percents of parents who chose a public school said they were 'very satisfied' with the school their child attended, compared with 52 percent for

parents with a child in the assigned public school" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995, p. 3).

Greater satisfaction also has been found consistently among parents who exercised choice of school within specific sites and under different choice arrangements (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992). Witte (1996) summarizes his findings on Milwaukee's voucher program by stating, "In all three years, choice parents were more satisfied with choice schools than they had been with their prior public schools and more satisfied than MPS parents with their schools" (p. 132). Similarly, in their study of public school choice in San Antonio, Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer (1996) report, "The results showed that choosing parents were significantly more satisfied with their children's schools "(p. 64). Driscoll (1992) also found higher levels of parent satisfaction in public schools of choice relative to traditional public schools. Finally, a positive relationship between choice and satisfaction has held in other countries as well. For example, the research of Goldring and Shapira (1991) on choice in Israel indicates that higher levels of parent satisfaction were positively correlated with the extent to which parents felt empowered and perceived the school's program as congruent with their choice.

It is important to emphasize that these increases in satisfaction come irrespective of the fact that few gains for students have been confirmed in choice settings. This is consistent with the findings of the Office of Educational Research (1992) who utilized the NELS:88 data to report:

> Four out of five parents of eighth grade students in public schools and nine out of ten parents of eighth grade students in private schools agreed that their child's school was doing a good job of preparing students for high school. ... We found that while parents whose children are not doing well in math (as measured by the NELS:88 achievement tests) are somewhat less satisfied with their children's schools than are parents whose children are doing well, a majority still believe that their children's schools are doing a good job of preparing students for high school and college. (p. 2)

Despite general agreement that seems to support the notion that parents who choose schools are likely to be satisfied, we know very little about whether parents who choose for academic reasons as compared to proximity or convenience are more likely to be satisfied. In other words, is there a relationship between specific reasons for choice and levels of satisfaction, or is it just the act of choosing that influences satisfaction?

School Choice and Parent Involvement

Archbald (1988) posits the following rationale for increased parent involvement in schools of choice. Parents are more comfortable with and supportive of a school they have chosen. Furthermore, after exercising choice, they have the desire to prove to themselves that they made a wise decision and are more

committed to the school. Collectively, these factors lead to greater involvement in schools of choice.

Although parent involvement has been the subject of extensive research, only limited evidence on its relationship with school choice has been obtained. There is some evidence that parents who choose private schools are more involved than public school parents in general (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987). Somewhat consistent with this belief, Witte (1996) reports: "Choice parents' involvement, already high in their prior public school, increased when children were enrolled in the choice schools in all areas but educational activities at home" (p. 132). This finding is consistent with data revealing higher parental involvement among parents participating in the public school choice system in San Antonio (Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer, 1996) and St Louis' interdistrict transfer program (Wells, 1996).

In an international study of the relationship between choice and involvement in three different types of schools of choice, Goldring and Bauch (1993) conclude:

> Catholic schools facilitate greater parental involvement at school and do a better job of eliciting parental involvement at home perhaps by conveying the schools' orientation toward discipline and responsibility to the parents at home in the management of their children. While this may be attributed, in part, to its religious orientation, single-focus magnet schools are clearly able to facilitate similar involvement of

parents. Multi-focus magnet schools appear less effective in facilitating parent involvement at school or at home. (p. 24)

Additional research is needed to better understand how we can account for the higher levels of parent involvement typically found in schools of choice. Are parents who choose schools more likely to be involved in general? Or is it that only parents who choose for specific reasons are more likely to be involved?

Research Questions

This study focuses on magnet schools as one type of choice strategy. Magnet schools are characterized by four qualities: (1) a thematic curriculum (e.g., international studies) or unique method of instruction (e.g., Paideia); (2) admissions criteria to facilitate voluntary desegregation; (3) choice of school by families; and (4) access to pupils beyond neighborhood attendance zones (Blank, 1990).

This research explores the relationships between parents' reasons for choice and their subsequent levels of satisfaction and involvement with their chosen magnet school. Given that research has shown a significant relationship between parent empowerment and satisfaction with schools of choice (Goldring and Shapira, 1991) and the theoretical premise that parents will be more involved in schools of choice because they have greater influence as a result of their use of voice and the potential to exit, parent influence will also be included as a predictor variable. Specifically, this paper addresses the following questions: to what extent are parents' reasons for choosing a magnet school related to their levels of satisfaction and

involvement with their children's school? In addition, we ask, are parents level of influence in school decision-making also an important factor in parents' levels of satisfaction and involvement?

Methodology

Sample

The data used in this study are from two large urban school districts in which magnet schools are an integral part of the district's student assignment plans. Both school districts implemented magnet schools as part of court-ordered desegregation plans. Furthermore, they commit significant resources to and regularly monitor these choice plans. In this sense, each school's district reflects a "good case scenario" for realizing the potential claimed by school choice advocates.

The total enrollment in the first district is 51,000 students, of whom 46% are served in magnets. Acceptance is based on a first-come, first served-basis, as long as racial/ethnic balance is improved. The second district serves 36,091 students, and 28% are enrolled in magnets. Students gain admissions to magnets via a lottery. In both districts, transportation is provided to all students and Parent Information Centers assist families with the choice process.

Eighteen elementary magnet schools, out of 25 full or dedicated magnets that had been in existence for two or more years, are included in this study. Magnet schools-within-schools are not included in the study. Eight magnets are from the first district described above, while ten are from the latter. The seven excluded

magnets were eliminated because of programmatic changes that had recently altered community perception. Each of the magnets in this sample had to be formally chosen by parents prior to their children being enrolled in the school.

Data Collection

Anonymous surveys were distributed to all parents with 5th grade children in the sample schools. Schools with response rates below 50% were targeted for follow-up that entailed a second round of visits to the schools and phone calls to survey coordinators who had been appointed at each site. The final sample of parents was 1,689 for a 65% response rate. Of these parents, 836 chose magnet schools. The return rate was comparable in both districts, and subsequent analysis revealed that the sample was representative of all parents of 5th graders by race and income in both sites.

Procedures and Variables

To explore the relationship between parents' reasons for choice and their perceived influence over school level decisions with parent involvement and satisfaction with magnet schools, descriptive and inferential multivariate statistics are utilized. The dependent variables in this study include parents' reports of their: (1) involvement at school (7 items, α=.7964) (e.g., serve as a volunteer in the library, clinic, playground, or cafeteria); and (2) satisfaction as indicated by the grade they assigned their chosen school (A=4 to F=0).

Predictor variables include parents' reports of their stated reasons for choice and their perceived influence over school decisions. Reasons for choice are measured by parents' responses to a binary list of reasons for choosing their school. Four count variables, each containing four items consistent with previous research on parental reasons for choice, were selected for this analysis: academic (e.g., academic reputation); convenience (e.g., near home); discipline/safety (e.g., discipline); and values (e.g., the school shares my values and beliefs). Parent influence is measured by parents' ratings of their perceived level of influence (10 items, α=.9148) over various school level decisions (e.g., how the school budget is spent)[2].

Since earlier research has established that parent socioeconomic status influences parent satisfaction (Henig, 1994) and involvement (Goldring and Bauch, 1993), parent income level (low: <$15,000; medium: $15,000-$24,999; medium-high: $25,000-$49,999; high: >$50,000) is included as a control variable in the analyses. Finally, to control for differences in distance since many parents choose schools on the other side of the city, the distance from their home to the chosen school was included in the regression on parent involvement.

Results

This section of the paper reports the results of the investigation. First, descriptive data on parent socioeconomic status, reasons for choice, perceived

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[2] For a complete list of the items in all scales, please refer to Appendix A.

influence over school level decisions, and levels of satisfaction and involvement are reported. Subsequently, the findings are organized around the central questions: (1) What is the relationship between parents' reasons for choice and their perceived level of influence over school decisions with their level of satisfaction with the chosen school?, and (2) What is the relationship between parents' reasons for choice and their perceived level of influence over school decisions with their level of involvement at the chosen school?

Parents Who Choose Magnet Schools

Table One summarizes data on parents who chose magnet schools in the two urban districts in this study in terms of their income levels, reasons for choice, perceived level of influence over school decisions, and levels of satisfaction and involvement with the school.

The income levels of these parents are distributed evenly in all four categories: low: <$15,000–28.9%; medium: $15,000-$24,999–21.3%; medium-high: $25,000-$49,999–27.9%; and high: >$50,000–21.9%. Since over seventy-five percent of the students in these districts qualify for free and/or reduced lunch, this group of magnet school choosers is of a higher average socioeconomic status than district parents in general.

Parents in this sample report choosing a magnet school based on academic factors (mean=.40), values (mean=.39), and discipline/safety (mean=.31). Reasons of convenience (mean=.14) were not as important in their choice of a school.

These magnet choosers are highly satisfied with their chosen school. While 79.8% award the school a grade of A or B, only 2.7% assign it a D or F. In contrast, these parents only indicated a moderate level of involvement at their children's schools. In response to the prompt: "How often do you or your spouse/partner do the following at this school?", the mean for the parents' level of involvement was only 2.38 (1=Never; 2=Rarely; 3=Sometimes; and 4=Often). This level seems disappointing since the mean distance from home to school for this group of magnet choosers was only 5.99 miles. Moreover, this sample is comprised of parents of elementary students, the age and school level at which parents are most frequently involved in general.

Magnet parents also reported relatively low levels of influence over school level decisions. When questioned "how much influence do parents in this school have in the following areas?", the mean for the parent influence scale was only 2.12 (1=None; 2=Very Little; 3=Some; and 4=A Great Deal). Thus, despite being empowered to choose their school, it does not appear that traditional power relationships between these magnet schools and their parents have been altered. School personnel still retain a vast majority of the power over site level decisions. This runs counter to choice advocates who contend that choice breaks down school monopolies.

Appendix B reports the intercorrelations of the predictor variables in this study, as well as parents' level of satisfaction with schools in the community. It is important to emphasize that no significant relationship between parents' reasons

Table 1

Descriptive Data on Magnet School Choosers (N=836)

Variables	Mean	S_D
Reasons for Choice		
Academic	.40	.28
Convenience	.14	.18
Discipline/Safety	.31	.29
Values	.39	.32
Influence in Decision-making	2.12	.69
Parent Involvement at School	2.38	.67
Distance from Home to School	5.99 miles	5.39
Level of Satisfaction with the Chosen Magnet		
	Freq.	Valid %
A	337	40.3
B	330	39.5
C	120	14.4
D	14	1.7
F	8	1.0
Income Level		
Low (<$15,000)	227	28.9
Medium ($15,000-$24,999)	167	21.3
Medium-high ($25,000-$49,999)	219	27.9
High: (>$50,000)	172	21.9

for choice exist with how they rate schools in the community. Thus, parents who choose magnet schools for different reasons share similar levels of dissatisfaction with schools in the community. Those who choose magnets for academic reasons are no more dissatisfied than those who choose for reasons of convenience. It is also important to emphasize that parent income only correlates significantly with values as a reason for choice. It is unrelated to the other three reasons for choice, as well as with perceived influence and satisfaction with the community schools in general. This lack of a linkage to these variables is important since we know that a broad range of incomes are represented by these magnet school parents.

The Relationship between Reasons for Choice and Parent Satisfaction

The results of the first regression analysis, presented in Table 2, indicate that parents' reasons for choosing magnet schools are important predictors of their levels of satisfaction with the school. Those parents who report choosing for values (β=.2399) and academic reasons (β=.1093) report higher levels of satisfaction, while those parents who choose for reasons of convenience (β=-.0819) indicate lower levels of satisfaction with their chosen magnet school. No significant difference was found among parents who choose for discipline/safety reasons. The perception of these parents that their children are in safe schools does not appear to translate into greater satisfaction with the school in general. Parents' level of income was also a non-significant predictor. That is, upper social class parents are no more likely to be satisfied with their magnet school than lower SES parents. This model accounted

for 9.4% of the variance in parent satisfaction.

Table 2

Regression of Parents' Reasons for Choice and Income Level on Satisfaction with School (N=836)

Predictor Variable	β	Sign. T
Income	-.0240	.4955
Academic	.1093	.0043 **
Convenience	-.0819	.0220 *
Discipline/Safety	.0132	.7431
Values	.2399	.0000 **

R^2=.0938 F=15.74 Sign. F=.0000

When parent influence is added to the model, values (β=.1494) and academic reasons (β=.0905) remain positive predictors, and reasons of convenience (β=-.0808) continues to be a negative predictor of parent satisfaction. Parent influence becomes the most powerful predictor (β=.3217) of parent satisfaction and doubles the amount of variance in parent satisfaction accounted for by the model (18.8%). This is consistent with the finding of Goldring and Shapira (1991) who reported that parent empowerment was a primary indicator of parent satisfaction with schools in a choice context. The results are presented in Table Three.

Table 3

Regression of Parents' Reasons for Choice, Influence, and Income Level on Satisfaction with School (N=836)

Predictor Variable	β	Sign. T
Income	-.0203	.5905
Parent Influence	.3217	.0000 **
Academic	.0905	.0273 *
Convenience	-.0808	.0350*
Discipline/Safety	.0244	.5706
Values	.1494	.0009 **

R^2=.1884 F=22.98 Sign. F=.0000

The Relationship between Reasons for Choice and Parent Involvement

Table Four presents the results of the regression analysis that explored the relationship between parents' reasons for choice and parent involvement. Parents' reasons for choice was less effective in predicting parent involvement than the parent background factor (i.e., income) included in the model. Consistent with earlier findings, higher income parents (β=.2805) related more frequent involvement with the school. Furthermore, only those parents who indicated choosing for values reasons (β=.2887) reported greater levels of involvement in the school (and opportunities for parent involvement was an item in the values scale). Parents who chose their magnet schools for academic, discipline/safety, and convenience reasons were no more or less likely to be involved in their school. Apparently, parents who choose for academic and discipline/safety reasons may feel

comfortable with their children being at the school and trust the school to do a good job. In turn, they feel less of a need to be involved at the school. From their perspective, their child is in a safe environment and is being served well without their involvement at the school. Parents who reported choosing for reasons of convenience, on average, live much closer to their schools. Ironically, despite this proximity, they reported no significant difference in level of involvement at the school. Moreover, these results do not support the notion that parents who choose for reasons of convenience will be involved more at the school to *make their decision a more positive one.* In this model, distance from home to school (β=-.0878) negatively correlated with parent involvement--the greater the distance the less involvement. This model accounted for 18.51% of the various in parent involvement at school for magnet choosers.

Table 4

Regression of Parents' Reasons for Choice, Income Level, and Distance to School on Involvement at the School (N=836)

Predictor Variable	β	Sign. T
Income	.2805	.0000 **
Distance from Home to School	-.0878	.0238 *
Academic	.0141	.7318
Convenience	.0498	.2088
Discipline/Safety	-.0632	.1405
Values	.2887	.0000 **

R^2=.1851 F=22.67 Sign. F=.0000

When parents' perceived level of influence in school decision-making was added to the model, the results remain highly consistent. Perceived parent influence (β=.1673) significantly predicts parent involvement at school. Thus, those parents who indicate that they have greater influence over school decisions are also more likely to be involved at the school. However, distance from home to school continues to be a negative predictor of parent involvement at school. In other words, distance to the school still inhibits parent involvement at school even when parents perceive themselves as having authentic influence in school level decision-making. Similarly, higher income parents (β=.2822) and those who choose based on values (β=.2416) indicate more frequent involvement with the school. Overall, this model accounted for 20.01% of the variance in parent involvement at school. Adding influence to the model only accounted for an additional 1.5% of the variance accounted for in parent involvement at magnet schools. Therefore, the relationship between parent influence and parent involvement at school may not be as tightly linked as has been predicted. The results are presented in Table Five.

Table 5

Regression of Parents' Reasons for Choice, Income Level, Influence, and Distance to School on Involvement at the School (N=836)

Predictor Variable	β	Sign. T
Income	.2822	.0000 **
Distance from Home to School	-.0846	.0386 *
Parent Influence	.1673	.0000 **
Academic	.0038	.9294
Convenience	.0513	.2194
Discipline/Safety	-.0575	.2036
Values	.2416	.0000 **

R^2=.2001 F=19.93 Sign. F=.0000

Conclusions

This paper utilizes data from magnet school parents in two urban districts to explore the relationship between parents' reasons for choice and their ultimate level of satisfaction with and involvement at the school. The impact of parent income and parent influence on involvement and satisfaction is also assessed. The findings are discussed within three general conclusions:

1) As reported in previous research, magnet school choosers choose for a wide array of reasons and are highly satisfied with their chosen school;

2) Parents' reasons for choice and perceived influence over school decisions are important predictors of satisfaction with the school; and

3) Parents' reasons for choice, influence, income, and distance from home to school significantly influence parent involvement at school.

Magnet school parents in this study indicated that they based their choice of school on academics, values, and discipline/safety. Reasons of convenience were a minimal factor. If, as market theory predicts, demand side pressures can create better supply side services, this must be viewed as positive news. It is beyond the control of these schools to respond to some parents' preferences for convenience. For example, they cannot relocate the school so that is close to everyone's place of employment. However, schools can strive to provide safer climates, serve parents' values, and improve teaching and learning. Additional research is clearly needed to determine the extent to which magnet schools respond to parents' different reasons for choice.

The relationship between parents' reasons for choice and their level of satisfaction with the school is an interesting one. The act of choosing itself appears *insufficient* to enhance parent satisfaction. Those parents who chose for convenience indicated lower levels of satisfaction with their chosen school. This finding has important implications for policy. Elmore and Fuller (1996) concluded that increasing school choice options will likely result in greater socioeconomic and racial stratification of students. However, after noting that parents who exercise choice appear to have similar preferences across race and social class, they argue, "This finding suggests that the design of choice programs should focus more on getting large proportions of families to make choices, rather than simply catering to

the preferences of active choosers" (p. 192). They go on to ask, "Would requiring all parents to choose, rather than passively making choices available only to active choosers, result in a decrease of social stratification in parent choices?" (p. 192). It is likely that forcing all parents to choose would result in a larger percentage of parents choosing for reasons of convenience. If this is the case, while such a policy might reduce socioeconomic stratification in a system of choice, it could also dilute gains in parent satisfaction typically found as a result of school choice since parents who choose for reasons of convenience actually report lower levels of satisfaction.

On the contrary, those parents who chose for academic reasons or for reasons related to their values indicated higher levels of satisfaction. Thus, parents who choose for academic reasons and values are really looking for better alternatives--not just convenience. When they perceive they have found a better alternative, they are more satisfied with the school.

Parent satisfaction is further enhanced by having influence over school level decisions. In other words, those parents who believe that they have greater influence over how the school does business also report being more satisfied with the school. This is consistent with the contention that parents who choose schools are more empowered to influence the school to meet their needs as a result of having a voice and the threat to exit the school. No relationship was found between parent income and satisfaction. Similarly, parent income was not correlated with influence in this study. Some researchers have postulated that more affluent parents can exert greater influence over schools than their lower socioeconomic

counterparts. It has also been contended that higher income parents can generate additional resources for their schools which leads to greater satisfaction with those institutions. The findings from this study are inconsistent with the latter two predictions. However, it is important to note the relatively low incomes of the parents in this sample. Fifty-percent of them had annual household incomes below $25,000.

Despite its lack of an association with parent satisfaction, parent income level was a powerful predictor of parent involvement at school. This relationship is likely explained by more affluent families having greater access to transportation. Lack of transportation is also a likely partial explanation of the negative correlation found between parent involvement and distance from home to school. When parent influence was added to the model, it only accounted for an additional 1.50% of variance in parent involvement. Although those parents who indicate that they have greater influence over school decisions are also more likely to be involved at the school, this small additional amount of variance accounted for suggest that it has limited ability to predict parent involvement beyond reasons for choice and income. Moreover, distance from home to school continues to be a negative predictor of parent involvement at school when influence is included in the model. In other words, distance to the school still inhibits parent involvement at school, even when parents perceive themselves as having authentic influence in school level decision-making.

Although reasons for choice have some ability to predict parent involvement

at school, they are more powerful predictors of parent satisfaction. Only those parents who reported choosing for values also indicated enhanced levels of involvement at school (and opportunities for parent involvement was an item in the values scale). Parents who chose their magnet schools for academic, discipline/safety, and convenience reasons were no more or less likely to be involved at their children's schools. It appears that parents who choose for academic and discipline/safety reasons feel comfortable with their children being at the school. They believe their children are in safe environments receiving a positive education. Consequently, they do not feel a great need to be involved at the school. Although parents who chose for reasons of convenience generally live closer to their schools, they also reported no significant difference in involvement at the school. These results do not support the notion that parents who choose for convenience will be involved more at the school to make their decision work. In other words, they are not more involved at the school to improve educational services or to make those services more consistent with their own needs.

The findings from this study should serve school personnel well who are interested in educating school choosers. The data clearly indicate that different reasons for choice exert unique influences on parent involvement and satisfaction. Parents who are leaving one school because they are dissatisfied will likely be no more satisfied if they choose a new school for reasons of convenience. Schools can share these finding to encourage parents to choose for reasons that are more likely to enhance their personal satisfaction with and involvement at the school

Simultaneously, these same reasons are more likely to provide demand side pressures that may force schools to improve their educational services.

Appendix A:
Variables

1. Parent Involvement at School (7 items, α=.7964)
   Parent indications of how often they or their spouse/partner do the following at school (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often).
   Attend school meetings and parent-teacher conferences
   Participate in fund-raising events
   Serve as a volunteer in the classroom
   Go on field trips
   Attend school performances, athletic events, socials, science or other fairs
   Come to school when there is a problem or misunderstanding
   Serve as a volunteer in the library, clinic, playground, or cafeteria

2. Parent Satisfaction
   Parent indications of the grade they would assign to their chosen school; (A=4 to F=0); (single item).

3. Parent Influence (10 items, α=.9148)
   Parent indications of how much influence parents in this school have in the following areas (1=None; 2=Very Little; 3=Some; 4=A Great Deal).
   Hiring and firing of school staff
   Setting school goals
   Setting school policies for discipline
   How the school budget is spent
   What is taught
   Setting the school's grading policy
   How money is raised
   Ways the school and parents work together
   Getting your child assigned to the teacher of your choice
   How subjects are taught

4. Parents' Reasons for Choice
   (a) Academic:
   The strong academic reputation
   Students get more individual help at the school
   Special programs such as in the arts, science, technology
   Smaller class sizes

   (b) Convenience:
   It is near my home
   It is near my job
   Before and after school child care
   I have another child in the same school

(c) Discipline/safety:
Discipline
Transportation to the school is available
Safety
I like the school's neighborhood

(d) Values:
The school shares my values and beliefs
Opportunities for parent involvement
The teaching style of the school
The racial/ethnic mix of the school

5. Parent Income
   (a) Low (<$15,000)
   (b) Medium ($15,000-$24,999)
   (c) Medium High ($25,000-$49,999)
   (d) High (>$50,000)

Appendix B:
Intercorrelation Matrix of Independent Variables

	Acad.	Conv.	Disc.	Values	Income	Distance	Influence	Satis. with Schools
Academic	1.000	-.0623	.2913**	.3573**	.0013	.1284*	.1659**	.0529
Convenience		1.000	.2240**	.0765	.0265	-.2599**	-.0009	-.0358
Disc/Safety			1.000	.4058**	-.0879	-.0578	.0870	.0738
Values				1.000	.1355*	.0471	.2963**	.0868
Income					1.000	.0872	.0645	-.0489
Distance						1.000	-.0060	.0732
Influence							1.000	.2234**
Satisfaction with Community Schools								1.000

* Sign at .01 level ** Sign. at .001 level

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